

OLAQ

Volume 1 , Number 4

Intellectual Freedom (Winter 1996) | Pages 5 - 6

July 2014

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Oberg, L. R. (2014). The flame that never dies: How we celebrated the holiday season on COLLIB-L. *OLA Quarterly*, 1(4), 5-6.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1049>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374 | <http://commons.pacificu.edu/olaq>

The Flame that Never Dies:

*How We Celebrated the Holiday Season
on COLLIB-L*

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In early December, 1995, a position announcement was posted on COLLIB-L (the College Librarians Listserv) by a religious institution of higher education that requires all applicants to provide a one-page "[Christian] faith statement." The appropriateness of this requirement was challenged immediately by several subscribers and a lively and sometimes acrimonious debate ensued. The conversation took several turns, touching on such topics as diversity, censorship, and Christmas. It concluded with a rousing argument over the appropriateness of certain traditional secular and non-secular holiday greetings. Excerpts from that conversation follow. (Names have been omitted to protect the innocent and guilty alike.)

Wed, 13 Dec 1995 23:56:17

Are you, as I suspect, asking applicants to announce their religious affiliation? Is religious belief an appropriate criterion for hiring a librarian?

Thu, 14 Dec 1995 15:43:16

In response to the question of whether or not religious belief is an appropriate criterion for hiring a librarian, of course it is—for a religion institution. It is an integral factor in determining whether the candidate will be able to support the institution's mission and goals ... The opinions expressed on this list are my own—and thank God I am free to express them!

Fri, 15 Dec 1995 05:46:22

Isn't that special!

Fri, 15 Dec 1995 04:58:45

Yes, but at some religious institutions you might not be free to express certain opinions, and that restriction would be imposed in the name of that same God.

Fri, 15 Dec 1995 14:35:10

I find the inability of some people on this list to distinguish the difference between a private religiously based institution and a public institution amazing. I am not saying that a sympathetic agnostic or atheist could not provide good service [at a religious institution], however, this is a [church school] whose mission is tied into the [church] ...

Fri, 15 Dec 1995 22:10:09

[I disagree with you because:] 1. I think diversity (pluralism) is healthy. 2. I think that one-issue litmus tests are ultimately self-defeating. 3. Though I have an on-going battle with a professor who eschews the dissemination of any values in his class, I grudgingly admit that there have been occasions on which I valued his counterpoint. Sometimes my enemy is my best ally.

Fri, 15 Dec 1995 08:08:18

Boy, I feel sorry for you and your institution. There can never be a good measure of library/librarian effectiveness. Also, [in reference to an earlier posting not reproduced here] Jesus is not the reason for the season. The winter solstice existed long before Jesus did, whoever he/she/it was ... Keep your religious pretensions off our list, please.

Fri, 15 Dec 1995 08:26:21

Are you advocating that we censor this list for mentions of religion? Peculiar position for a librarian.

15 Dec 1995 09:55:46

I don't know what brought on the "Jesus is the reason for the season" comment earlier but your response amazes me! You are mistaking the seasons of winter with the season of Christmas. Jesus is the reason for the wonderful celebration of Christmas ...

15 Dec 1995 10:56:46

Yes, there is a reason I have to immerse myself in all this stuff—I have a wife with Christian origins, and I have two small children. What I don't have is patience for Christians who foist their values and beliefs on professional listservs.

15 Dec 1995 11:44:48

I do not want to trigger a flame war, or even a discussion of what some may find to be an extraneous issue, but I do find myself to be very uncomfortable with [the last poster's] harsh response regarding the "Jesus is the reason for the season" message ...

Fri, 15 Dec 1995 12:00:08

[...] I have just had the opportunity to read my transmission [and I note] a misspelling. The message refers to sending a personal "communicator," and this of course should be "communication." Unless, that is, one assumes a Freudian slip, and a secret wish that [the previous poster] have a series of close encounters of the sort experienced by Scrooge in Dickens' Christmas Carol. Or perhaps a desire to send an enforcer of large muscles and small words to visit those who include elements in their signature that I do not like. I had neither of these in mind.:)

Fri, 15 Dec 1995 12:46:33

Language is my enforcer.

Fri, 15 Dec 1995 12:56:21

[...] I am responsible for the "Jesus is the reason for the season" message and I was so surprised by [the] harsh response that I haven't been able yet to reply. [...] Forgive me if the happiness that I feel during this joyous season has overflowed into my workday and onto this list. It hasn't hindered my professional duties in any way ... they may have even been more prosperous!

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Fri, 15 Dec 1995 13:44:43

... It is all too easy for those of us in the christian majority (lower case 'c' intended to include all those unchurched secular types) ... to blissfully ignore the millions of Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, etc., who live and work with us ... Hence, the attitude that came out of this thread: If you do not *love*

Christmas, you must be sub-human ... So, back off, you Christmas lovers. It ain't a sin to feel otherwise.

Fri, 15 Dec 1995 13:48:02

Now CHILDREN! Where is the good spirit? This is relevant to librarians and any other institutions in a Christian society ...

Fri, 15 Dec 1995 14:20:08

I wonder if the use of the term "Christian society" was meant deliberately to inflame, or was it meant in jest? Membership in one's personal exclusive societies is no indicator of where the rest of the nation, or world, is or belongs.

Fri, 15 Dec 1995 14:22:11

I wonder: Does this list speak only to librarians living in XX's "Christian society?" If so, please unsubscribe me.

Fri, 15 Dec 1995 14:32:11

Well, I've tried. I sat on my hands, bit my tongue, wrote and deleted my own messages. But, XX's message would not let me be silent. For starters, I want to ask XX why he calls this a "Christian" society? I thought it was an American one ...

Fri, 15 Dec 1995 14:48:06

Hey, all this heavy talk is getting to me.

Sat, 16 Dec 1995 10:34:41

To the person who wrote: Keep your religious pretension off our list, please: Thank GOD we have the freedom to thank God on this list.

Sat, 16 Dec 1995 10:58:09

And thank Horus we have the right to object to your smug assumptions about list members.

Sat, 16 Dec 1995 11:16:28

I think we have the framers of the U. S. Constitution to thank for freedom of speech and religion—god had nothing to do with it ... using a list created to discuss college library issues to express one's faith seems a bit over-zealous and inappropriate to me.

Sat, 16 Dec 1995 14:27:57

... I will not post on this subject again as I think enough has been said. But I did find some of the discussion on the topic interesting, and a reflection of the struggles we have in this country regarding the difference between private and public religious expression, and the appropriate place of religiously based schools in helping students to understand and integrate their religious traditions into all walks of life.

Sat, 16 Dec 1995 15:20:08

... Merry Christmas to all (or should I say best wishes for any year-end/year-beginning observances of a secular or religious or cultural nature that you might observe, and I am quite sure I have offended someone by acknowledging that anyone would ever celebrate anything! I'm thinking that people in libraries are being awfully touchy this December!

Tue, 19 Dec 1995 09:50:59

... I maintain that Christmas is NOT a Christian holiday anymore, except for those who choose to celebrate it as such. It's a cultural holiday. In fact, Christmas, even in its religious form, is an adaptation of pre-Christian Winter Solstice holidays ... Happy holidays to all, no matter how you celebrate or don't celebrate them!

Tue, 19 Dec 1995 10:49:59

Oh [come on], you can "maintain" all you want. My Jewish and pagan friends wouldn't buy it, although they might feel overwhelmed by your very articulate enthusiasm and not say anything. And as far as Christmas being a cultural celebration in which "everyone" takes part, you're way off base. Jews? Muslims? And what about those African-Americans who have rejected the commercial mess we've made of the season in favor of Kwanzaa? ☐

*"You have not converted
a man because you have
silenced him."*

—John Morley